



## REPORT ON RESEARCH

### *Impact of Trauma and Violence on Vulnerable Women's Health: Strategies to Reduce Violence and Promote the Health of People Working in the BC Sex Industry*

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## WHRN Workshop Summary

### **Policy Implications with People Working in the Sex Industry (PWSI)<sup>1</sup> in Mind**

1. Remove prohibitive sanctions from the Canadian criminal code related to prostitution to ensure laws will provide PWSI with safer working environments;
2. Provide adults who are beginning to work in the sex industry with peer mentoring, training, and workshops that will help them determine if they want to work in the sex industry and provide them with the practical knowledge and skills that will ensure their health, safety, and success if they do – for example, money management and sexual health;
3. Bring doctors and/or nurses into escort agencies to provide on-site consultations and exams for PWSI;
4. Provide non-judgmental assistance to PWSI that will support them within their current relationships, whether that be violent, ‘unhealthy’, and/or drug addicted relationships as these actions and behaviours are symptomatic of underlying issues;
5. Provide those who wish to leave the sex industry with supportive housing and comprehensive long term leaving strategies;
6. Create zones of tolerance for street-based PWSI. While ultimately the goal is for no PWSI to have to work outdoors, those that do should be allowed to work in areas that are well-lit and ensure access to health and support services. The goal of these zones of tolerance are to counteract current displacement of sex work to residential neighborhoods and industrial areas and ensure policing targets exploitation and violence, rather than criminalization of workers or clients;
7. Scale up mobile health and harm reduction services that are accessible to PWSI working in outlying areas and improve access to care;
8. Make social services for those involved in sex work more inclusive so that those who do not explicitly identify as ‘sex workers’ feel comfortable accessing those services (e.g., Middle Eastern immigrant women);
9. Acknowledge and address the isolation and stigma experienced by PWSI and how this is an important determinant of their health and safety;

### **Policy Implications with Researchers in Mind**

10. Attempt to transcend ideological debates and instead focus on the practical concerns of PWSI including their health and safety;
11. Obtain funding and support for community projects that are driven by the concerns of the communities;
12. Welcome PWSI to become active participants in academic and community-based research projects as they have access to specialized knowledge and may be better able to build trust in

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase ‘people working in the sex industry’ has been employed because it is broad in nature, but also because it is more encompassing and less stigmatizing than more common terms like ‘prostitute’ or ‘sex trade worker’ which in our society often evokes images of defilement and debasement. PWSI includes freelance workers in bars and strip clubs, agency-based escorts, independent home-based escorts, exotic entertainers, exotic masseuses and people who negotiate the selling of sex services on the street or in parks. Some individuals who work in the sex industry also work in nude movies, pornography and/or perform telephone sex.

the communities we work with. Doing so will lead to more relevant, practical, and effective research;

13. Consider the entire cycle of harm when we seek solutions to drug addiction among some PWSI. For example, we need solutions for those selling drugs just as much as we need solutions for those consuming them, interrupting this cycle is the only way to move forward;

### **Policy Implications with all Canadians in Mind**

14. Develop workshops that will educate the public about the realities of sex work, including the diversity of people's experiences;
15. Target a special set of workshops toward escort agencies and massage parlours catering to immigrant populations to make them aware of the increased stigma, violence, and barriers to social support experienced by immigrant women engaged in survival sex work;
16. Work to change the perception of those in the media in order to challenge lay stereotypes surrounding the sex industry;
17. Ensure that PWSI get the same respect and protection under the law as that guaranteed to all Canadians;
18. Consult PWSI in law and policy changes, including involving them in standardized sensitivity training for police officers;
19. Ensure that policy reforms made are gender neutral and attend to socio-economic as well as cultural differences.

### **Workshop Overview**

The Women's Health Research Network (WHRN) workshop on strategies to reduce violence and promote the health of people working in the sex industry (PWSI) in BC was held on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The one day workshop brought together community and academic researchers and frontline agency representatives from around the province concerned about the health and well-being of one of Canada's most vulnerable populations: people working in various locations of the sex industry. Due to its semi-illegal nature and the heated debate surrounding it, seldom do researchers and community service providers from diverse sectors find themselves together in the same room to exchange ideas and discuss policy relating to how to reduce the trauma and violence experienced by PWSI and promote their safety and health. This workshop provided a safe forum for discussion and debate and constituted a launching point for a larger conference on the topic planned for the fall 2008. Some of the main objectives of the workshop were to:

1. Further understand the impact of different policy environments on the safety and health of PWSI;
2. Learn about research/experiments proposed and underway in BC to reduce violence in off-street and on-street locations as well as existing programs to help PWSI wishing to leave the industry;
3. Identify avenues for further research and policy development.

### **Framing the Problem**

Cecilia Benoit, co-leader of the WHRN and professor of sociology at the University of Victoria, chaired the workshop and began the morning session by outlining some of the findings in one of her community-academic projects on the occupational health and safety of 'frontline' service workers in Victoria, BC. Cecilia discussed how recent research has shown that changes in labour markets around the globe have resulted in a growth of contingent and non-standard

work, wage polarization, and the exclusion of vulnerable workers from social citizenship rights; specifically those enjoyed by non-marginalized workers, including equitable access to quality health care. Compared to the general population, people working in lower income frontline service occupations are more likely to report poorer health and inadequate access to the health care services they need. The findings included data on the self-reported health status and access to health services among hairstylists (stylists) and food & beverage servers (servers) working in the formal economy and PWSI working in the informal economy. While broadly similar in regard to key characteristics including the gendered division of labour, educational requirements, dependency on tips, and job instability, the findings show significant variation in health status and access to required health services among these three occupational groups. This opening presentation highlighted the value of comparative data when studying PWSI in order to show how they are similar to other workers in many respects and yet are more vulnerable in that they report the poorest mental and physical health, as well as the least access to health care. While both those working as stylists and PWSI report low rates of access to supplementary medical benefits or the ability to pay out-of-pocket medical expenses, PWSI have the added health burden of working in a deeply stigmatized occupation.

A short question and answer session following Cecilia's talk led to a discussion regarding the use of honorariums in studies that incorporate vulnerable populations, as well as how the gender of the client might affect job satisfaction. A related question was whether stylists tend to serve female clients while PWSI tend to serve male clients? In response to this, one workshop participant pointed out that many stylists have a large male clientele and that stylists can have negative and positive experiences with both male and female clients. Another question was posed as to whether exotic dancers could potentially be considered a part of the formal occupational sector as they work in licensed establishments. It was pointed out by another participant that exotic dancers have an equally precarious position to that of other PWSI as they have roughly equivalent constraints placed on their actions. Among other things, even though exotic dancers are formally 'employed', they still run the risk of being fired for no provocation, they work in a highly sexualized environment, and are dependent on their tips to support themselves and their 'support staff' (bartenders and disc jockeys). Cecilia noted that the study's findings suggest PWSI and stylists working in their own homes report the greatest job satisfaction as they have higher levels of autonomy and control over their working hours and clientele.

### **Experiences of Violence among Vancouver Street Workers**

Our next presenter was Kate Shannon, who is affiliated with the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and a PhD candidate with the University of British Columbia. Kate is also a co-principal investigator and project coordinator of the *MAKA Project Partnership* that is examining the health-related harms and barriers experienced by women in survival sex work in Vancouver, Canada, in partnership with the WISH Drop-In Centre Society. As part of a community-based partnership over a two-year period, this research aimed to explore the experiences of violence against highly vulnerable street-based PWSI and inform recommendations for policy and prevention efforts that promote the health and safety of women working on the streets of Vancouver. Kate explained that one of the objectives of the MAKA Project is direct involvement of a peer team of women. The methodology of the project included semi-structured peer-conducted interviews with two hundred women to map their working conditions and health-related risks. This involved 'social mapping' whereby the women were

given a street map and asked to describe working conditions and what impact these conditions have on their health and safety on the streets. The maps showed the areas women avoided due to police harassment and violence. What the research reveals is that these are the same core areas where health services and syringe exchange programs are available to women. Kate pointed out that the findings suggest the need for mobile health and support services targeted at outdoor areas where women work to help them maintain their health and safety, and improve access to care. Kate went on to explain that the main factors reducing women's ability to safely negotiate condom use for sexual services were policy and working conditions that influenced the women's ability to manage their safety and health. In particular, women servicing clients in outdoor public spaces (cars, alleys), as compared to indoor settings, were less able to safely negotiate condom use for sexual services. Another factor impacting the women's health and safety was working in isolated areas where they felt less control in negotiating their sexual exchanges, and where they were also subject to greater incidents of violence, including being thrown out of moving cars, being raped and/or beaten. Kate concluded her presentation by giving some recommendations for improving safety: revising the Canadian criminal code in favour of laws that will support women, providing safer work environments where they are able to safely negotiate prevention practices, creating non-harassment zones with the police, scaling-up mobile health and outreach services in locations where these women are working to support their health and safety, providing supportive housing for the women, and developing a comprehensive plan for women wanting to transition out of survival sex work.

### **Behind Closed Doors**

Lauren Casey was the next speaker. She holds a Masters Degree in Sociology and Criminology, specializing in women, sex work and illicit substance use and she is currently working as an independent consultant, providing various training and public speaking engagements across Canada. Lauren began her presentation, *Behind Closed Doors*, by outlining the findings from a three-year research initiative with the Prostitutes Empowerment and Education Resource Society (PEERS) that examined escort agencies in Victoria, BC. Lauren explained that over the three years of the project she and her colleague, Tracie Fawkes, conducted interviews with the police, municipal licensing authorities and others who have come into contact with indoor sex industry workers. They also completed a total of 111 qualitative interviews with women working as escorts, including escort agency owners, drivers, and telephone operators. The data were then analyzed in the third year of the project with the major recommendations arising from the PWSI themselves. An innovative and informed standpoint was then developed that juxtaposed the current community response to indoor sex industry workers, offering new and original models that capture the needs of this population. Lauren pointed out that the usefulness of this analysis lies in its ability to contextualize the practices and processes of the lives of indoor sex workers in an effort to discover levels of violence and/or trauma that occurs in this largely hidden population. The preliminary results showed that only a small percentage of escorts did not like their clients and the majority was 'satisfied' with their employment. Lauren noted that the stigma associated with escort work was the main challenge for these women and they often will not disclose the nature of their work or access outreach services, such as those offered by PEERS, for fear of further stigmatization. Many of the indoor workers said they made the decision to work in the industry but did not wish to identify as PWSI nor access support services. Lauren concluded by relating some of the 'next steps' identified by the participants in the study. This included access to 'in-reach' services where escorts could have

regular on-site visits from doctors or nurses, workshops for novice escorts, and health and safety education and money management skill training for all escort workers. A long term recommendation was the development of a safe-space escort agency that operates using the insights of escort agency workers themselves.

In response to a question regarding participant/researcher rapport and the impact of having experiential (peer) interviewers as a basis for increasing self disclosure and trust, Lauren explained that having the direct/lived experiences of women who have worked in the sex industry often translates into instant trust. However, rapport can also develop if there is an equal relationship between the researcher (academic) and person working in the sex industry, especially if the latter is respected as an important knowledge broker. Another participant commented that a commitment to ethical engagement needs to be an imperative and suggested the PACE website (<http://www.pace-society.ca/>) as a place to find more information. Further discussion regarding honorariums elicited the opinion that compensating people for their time is empowering, and helps them feel that the knowledge they impart is important and valuable.

Tracie Fawkes followed up Lauren's talk by sharing her experiences working as a research assistant on the *Behind Closed Doors* project. Tracie has been working with PEERS and the Canadian National Coalition of Experiential Women (CNCEW) for just under two years in many different capacities and uses her past experiences working in the sex industry to inform her work on the above mentioned project. Tracy shared her passion for the research and how she strives to do work that will improve the lives of women who are often invisible in our society. Tracie shared how she came to PEERS 17 years *after* leaving the sex industry and why she had remained a hidden worker for that lengthy period. In particular, Tracie told us the reason had to do with the stigma associated with the sex industry and the accompanying fear that she would be rejected by her friends, family, and community if they learned about her activities in the sex industry. Prior to becoming associated with PEERS, Tracie indicated she never felt she had a voice in her community. Today she has become an advocate for other women working in the industry, and at the same time has had an opportunity to deal with some of her own issues and share her insights with other PWSI. What Tracie learned through working on the above mentioned project is the great diversity of experiences within the sex industry, and that not all women identify themselves as 'victims'. Many PWSI like the work they do and want to improve their skills and be active in changing worker rights and improving their health and safety.

### **Safety Concerns of Immigrant Indoor Sex Workers**

The final presenter of the morning session was Soni Thindal who currently works with the Asian Society for the Intervention of AIDS (ASIA), coordinating the service delivery of the ORCHID Project. Soni began her talk by describing the ORCHID project, an academic-community partnership created in 2004 which trains PWSI as peer outreach workers and some volunteers with a diverse range of language expertise. Soni has been with the project for two and a half years, working directly with women working in indoor sex venues such as massage parlours, apartments (i.e., personal living spaces out of which one or more sex workers work) and 'micro-brothels'. The ORCHID project reaches out to mainly Asian and immigrant women working in a variety of indoor sex venues. Over the years many of these women have disclosed to ORCHID their experiences of trauma and violence while working in the off-street sex industry. Soni explained that patience and consistency is required for such disclosure to happen as it takes a long time to build trust. This can take up to a year and requires continual dialogue letting people know that ORCHID is there to help and able to provide referrals and handle

requests. Their research has shown that these PWSI experience violence at the hands of their male clientele but also from law enforcement officials. Soni went on to explain that the type of location is likely to affect women's safety, that few owners or managers enforce safety measures, that workers can be fired if they practice 'unsafe' sex, and that managers often welcome back unsafe clients. Some parlour managers also fine women if a client makes a complaint about her services, putting the women in an even more vulnerable position. Language barriers further contribute to violence for these workers as clients sometimes exploit the worker's inability to speak English. When a woman is unable to communicate her needs or boundaries or understand what her clients are asking, she is put at greater risk. Soni concluded by highlighting the diversity of needs and experiences of this particular segment of PWSI, who face formidable barriers in negotiating safe working conditions due to poverty, illegal immigrant status, single parenthood and inequities based on intersections of race, class, and gender.

### **The First Discussion**

The first discussion centred around one participant's concern for the Middle Eastern women with whom she works. To make ends meet, these women engage in sex work but are often subject to rough and abusive treatment from their regular clientele who are largely from the women's own ethnic community. These clients often exploit their knowledge of the women's cultural and social backgrounds and abuse them knowing they will not contact police for fear of having their children apprehended. The participant asked the group for suggestions for solving this problem as these women are isolated from each other and lack access to a formal social support system. Workshop participants suggested strategies to remove possible indicators of vulnerability and make it so that clients know as little about the women as possible. These strategies included self-defense training courses, hiding weapons, giving the illusion of having a social support network (have people call or stop by), and concealing children's toys when expecting clients. The group acknowledged that any plans for these women needed to be culturally appropriate. It was noted that violence is culturally and spatially contingent; as are personal skills for developing personal boundaries and women need to learn how to be able to 'read' clients for their potential for violence. In the case of Middle Eastern women and the violence they experience in their own homes, it is difficult to find strategies. Even networking between the women is somewhat problematic as there is considerable shame associated with identifying as PWSI, especially among immigrants who encounter strong social norms about what constitutes as a 'good' immigrant. Exacerbating the situation is that these women often feel they are not entitled to government services because of illegal citizen status.

Another issue raised during the discussion was the expectations of PWSI in terms of the kind of treatment they feel they should receive from doctors and other health care professionals. It was suggested that perhaps research reporting on the violent and traumatic experiences of PWSI may under-report the number of actual cases, in part because these events are so frequent in the lives of PWSI that they may begin to normalize them and therefore not report them. If we consider the experiences of PWSI alongside privileged women it may be that the former's incidence of violence and trauma is significantly higher. Some participants suggested that one way to ascertain whether there is underreporting is for researchers to be more transparent about the actual questions they ask PWSI. That way, people reviewing the research can better assess the responses of the PWSI. Another participant responded to this point by explaining how behaviour she would consider violent is not even considered an event for some women working in the sex industry – in other words, social location conditions a person's expectations of

violence and abuse. Another participant suggested that we must support people within their relationships – whether they ‘choose’ to stay in a violent relationship or use addictive substances – because these actions/behaviours are symptomatic of other factors. For example, if a relationship is abusive but the woman wants to stay in the relationship, we need to help them within this relationship as long as they opt to stay.

### **Legislative Approaches to Sex Work**

The afternoon session began with a presentation by Fran Shaver, a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University. Her research and publications include a special focus on prostitution and other forms of sex work. Her current research focuses on the social determinants of health and well-being and their impact on work and family environments. Fran’s presentation provided an overview of four common legislative approaches to sex work: criminalization, legalization, decriminalization, and what has come to be known as the Swedish model. Fran highlighted the similarities and differences among these four models, and summarized the appropriateness and effectiveness of each approach for promoting the security, health and human rights of PWSI, their families, and the communities in which they work. She also identified where opportunities for positive action have arisen and are likely to arise in the future, even when social and legal reforms have been slow to materialize. As she pointed out, her main goal was to take workshop participants to a ‘good place’ by illustrating the positive opportunities for achieving good health in a criminalized situation. Fran further stated the need for social and legal reform but pointed out that there is still room for positive action within a criminalized model such as the one in Canada. While some aspects of the criminalized model reinforce exploitation and undermine the ability to work safely and limit access to health services due to associated stigma, there are some positive changes happening such as recognition of the increasingly globally linked network of sex worker organizations and the possibility for movement and variability of enforcement within the criminalized system. Fran made some recommendations for moving forward, such as ensuring that PWSI get the same respect and protection under the laws available to all Canadians, making sure that PWSI are consulted in law and policy changes, and taking into consideration all the different sectors of the sex industry with a broader, long range lens. We also need to ensure such reforms are gender neutral, attend to socio-economic differences, and are sensitive to cultural differences.

### **Leading the Way**

The next presenter was Susan Davis, a 22-year veteran of the sex industry and current member of the BC Coalition of Experiential Communities, *Living in Community* steering committee – a city wide project to provide balanced perspectives on the sex industry. She is also a part of the Sex Industry Worker Safety Action Group – a partnership between PWSI and the Vancouver Police Department that works on actions that have impact on the health and safety of PWSI that work to build trust between the police and the sex industry, and reduce the harms of the enforcement tactics of the past. Susan’s presentation covered the inception and planning of the *Developing Capacity for Change Project*, which is based on Vancouver sex workers’ desire to explore cooperative business models as a way to generate alternative sources of income, increase health and safety, build community capacity, create a sex worker safe work space, and increase their control over their collective destiny. Susan began by providing an overview of the project’s framework – which includes governance policies, decision making procedures, terms of reference, and membership criteria. She also explained the steps taken to ensure occupational

health and safety training and outlined recent plans to engage union development experts in exploring what this organization might look like, including an action plan of a wide variety of stakeholders and perspectives. Susan also gave a historical look at the sex industry in Vancouver and highlighted some of the key shifts in the social climate which led to the current marginalization of PWSI in the city, a situation which has significantly impacted their health, safety, and control over their working conditions. Susan concluded her presentation by highlighting the potentially positive outcomes of involving PWSI in standardized training for police officers, as well as how a permanent location for the *Developing Capacity for Change Project* could provide a site for workshops, training initiatives and fundraising events. The cooperative project could also reduce the isolation often associated with street-based sex work and provide a safe place to work, ensuring that PWSI have the same basic working conditions that other Canadians enjoy. Health and safety would be enhanced for the general public as well, with less residual impact of sex work on the street and an increased cohesion between the workers and the rest of the community.

### **The Victoria Escort Agency**

The next speaker was Jody Paterson, a writer, editor and communications strategist and the former executive director of Prostitutes Empowerment Education and Resource Society (PEERS). Jody is actively engaged on a number of social fronts in the community, and is also an advocate for improved working conditions for adult people working in the sex industry. Jody's presentation outlined the innovative social enterprise escort agency project taking place in Victoria, British Columbia, which is based on recommendations made by participants from the *Behind Closed Doors* research project and other indoor workers. The goal of the project is to create a social enterprise agency that is both an excellent workplace as determined by PWSI themselves, and able to generate a steady revenue stream to fund programs, services, housing and other basic needs of disadvantaged PWSI, particularly those working outdoors in what are often violent, dangerous conditions. Jody explained that the brothel will be a licensed business operating in the 'gray zone' of escort agencies but as a drug-free, violence-free workplace with adult workers. It would create a good working environment by ensuring PWSI guide the decision making process and by funneling profits into programs for PWSI struggling with addiction, homelessness, mental illness and other major challenges. Jody went on to point out that the biggest challenge is securing start-up funding for the project from potentially leery investors and finding a way to remain discreet and discourage the media from broadcasting the location of the brothel. The media may bring unwanted public – and possibly legal – attention to the agency, threatening its ability to carry on operations and continue to attract customers, who value discretion highly. However, if these challenges can be solved, the brothel could serve as a model for other communities and PWSI themselves could implement the model to generate revenue to support women who are starting or leaving sex work, by offering orientations, workshops and possibly mentoring.

### **Programs for Sex Workers Seeking Other Paths**

The final presentation was given by Lisa Osbitsch, who worked intermittently in the sex industry for almost 13 years before getting involved with PEERS. Lisa shared how in 2004 she began a series of training and employment opportunities with PEERS and is now their *Elements* Program Coordinator and Facilitator. Lisa spoke of her personal experience of coming to PEERS first as a sex industry worker who wanted to access their programs and resources through to

being hired as a program coordinator and facilitator. Lisa provided details on her experience of working in various facets of the PEERS program and shared the current reality of street-based sex work as seen through the eyes of an outreach worker. She discussed her former experience of feeling isolated and disconnected from her community because of the stigma associated with sex work, as well as her struggle with substance use and eventual success in overcoming these challenges with the support of the PEERS staff and programming. Through her experience with PEERS Lisa found strong, female role models among women who had experience working in the sex industry and these women were able to guide her as to the options available to PEERS program graduates. Lisa eventually moved on to college until finally being called back to PEERS as an employee and joining the ranks of accomplished and successful experiential women and mentors.

### **The Second Discussion**

The final discussion of the day was opened by Cecilia Benoit who highlighted some of the key themes found in the presentations and reflected on some of the insights and future directions elicited by the speakers. Cecilia mentioned the importance of not focusing on the ideological battles that surround the sex industry and instead suggested we transcend these disputes by placing emphasis on the health and well-being of PWSI in order to come up with strategies to reduce the violence and trauma they experience. Cecilia applauded the many community projects coming forward that are including the perspectives of people who have worked in the sex industry. She pointed out that initiating evaluations of these projects might be an effective way to provide empirical evidence that could lend legitimacy and which makes them much harder to shut down. Effective evaluations can also be useful in securing future funding and sustainability over the long haul. Cecilia cautioned that there are some researchers who oppose the sex industry and who do not incorporate the views of PWSI in their research and yet oftentimes the findings coming out of this kind of research is widely circulated to the general public. To counter this phenomenon, researchers must develop strategic research designs, critically analyse the data, and let the evidence speak for itself.

A general discussion then began about the need for ‘sex work 101’, in other words, educating the community (service providers, government agencies, police officers, and the lay public) about the realities of sex work. It was suggested that it is important to increase knowledge sharing and avoid engaging in ‘moral’ debates. Some participants commented that this workshop is one of the first times that academics and community-based researchers have gotten together for a civil discussion regarding ways to move forward and improve the health and safety of PWSI. The need to align this topic with strong, critically designed research was reinforced and came up as one of the strengths of the day’s workshop—the strong focus on inclusive participatory research.

The discussion ended with a conversation about the role of the media in shaping public perceptions about the sex industry and those working in it. Participants felt that it was necessary to include the media in these discussions because changing the views of those involved in the media would go a long way toward changing public perception of the sex industry as a whole. One possibility would be to make more documentaries that accurately portray the diversity of experiences of those who work in the sex industry, including those who choose to work in the industry. Others suggested that we are all responsible for challenging inaccurate portrayals of the sex industry and those who work in it and can do so by writing letters to the editor that provides different perspectives on the issue. Another participant commented on the importance of

learning to be media-savvy in order to avoid suffering ‘violence’ at the hands of the media when inaccurate perspectives and narratives about PWSI are portrayed. The politics of representation was also raised, specifically, the need to work with the media to help them portray those working in the sex industry as *people* like the rest of us, rather than objectifying them as ‘prostituted’ or ‘trafficked persons.’